



Naturalist-in Series  
**NIGHTSTALKING**  
 by Christopher K. Starr



Review of:

Chris Ferris (1986): *The Darkness is Light Enough: The Field Journal of a Night Naturalist*. London: M. Joseph 373 pages.

Chris Ferris 1988. *Out of the Darkness*. London: Unwin Hyman 251 pp.

[51st in a series on "naturalist-in" books; see [www.ckstarr.net/reviews\\_of\\_naturalist.htm](http://www.ckstarr.net/reviews_of_naturalist.htm)]

**Chris Ferris's field studies of nocturnal wildlife started with an injury that caused chronic back pain.** This made it difficult for her to sleep except in short stretches, and for relief she took to roaming in the nighttime around her home in rural southern England. Over time her nature walks developed a closer focus, and she established a 320-hectare study area with two forests and three farms. She had good relations with the local farmers, who took an enlightened view of the wildlife on their grounds.

Each chapter of *The Darkness is Light Enough* is headed with a fine drawing of a wild mammal or bird in a typical activity, some almost like wood engravings in their use of white lines. Interspersed in the chapters are many indifferent landscape and vegetation photographs, evidently included in order to break up the text.

Going out during most nights became a way of life for some years. She was out in all kinds of weather, remarking on "Walking these sodden woods for the sheer joy of it." And in late September, "The trees are in turmoil tonight, bending and swaying helplessly as the wind's giant hand passes through...The surge and roar of the foliage, the occasional glimpses of sky, a momentary lull, then back with unseen ferocity, the storm rages once more." Like Ferris, the animals that she studied seemed not to mind being out in stormy weather.

*The Darkness is Light Enough* is not exactly a book about seasonality, but the chapters are arranged in diary form according to season, starting with the winter of 1980-81 and ending with the winter of 1984-85. Attention to seasonal changes in

the environment and biota are mostly just in passing.

Rather, her subject is the lives of the European badger (*Meles meles*) and red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), with some attention to a census of the tawny owl (*Strix aluco*) population. Her studies were mentored by Ernest Neal (1911-1998), author of a classic long-term study of wild badgers. *Out of the Darkness* is a continuation of her study, as is a third book



published in 1990.

The European badger is found in most of Europe and into western Asia. It has a powerful, stocky body with forelegs adapted for digging, which it uses to dig extensive burrows known as *setts*, with many entrance holes. These can be very durable and may be occupied across multiple generations. Even so, they are far from static, as new holes are added to the complex and some old ones are disused and overgrown. Some may be taken over by rabbits. This nocturnal mammal feeds on a broad variety of prey, especially earthworms and moles, as well as hedgehogs if they can master the trick of unrolling them to get at the vulnerable underside. It also digs for roots and bulbs and eat acorns and other nuts.

The red fox, *Vulpes vulpes*, is found across the Northern Hemisphere, where it is common in many places. It likewise occupies burrows in the ground, but is much less a creature of the subsoil. Much less



omnivorous than the badger, its main food is small rodents, but it also hunts rabbits, hares and many kinds of birds. The tawny owl is widespread in Europe with some presence in northern Asia. Like the badger and fox, it is a nocturnal predator that hunts a wide variety of prey.

As in long-term studies of chimpanzees, gorillas and lions, the human observer and wild creatures can in time become tolerant of each other. Likewise, badgers and foxes are smart animals that became curious about Ferris and accepted her as an unthreatening part of their environment. They would sometimes go on walks with her, rather in the manner of a dog, and on some occasions they were so trusting as to allow her to treat wounds. Her aim was to know the animals and their habitat thoroughly in all their seasons and moods. She observed all aspects of their lives except what took place inside the burrows. There was simply no low-tech way to make observations below ground. In some seasons she made rounds to check on the animals, often encountering familiar badgers or foxes much as one might meet acquaintances in a stroll around one's own neighbourhood.

Among the most engaging observations were of family life, including parents facilitating the development of their offspring's hunting skills. She was able to watch the young animals mature, gradually show more and more independence in coming out of the den and moving about. If successful, younger animals established families of their own, she came to appreciate the animals' individual personalities (after all, badgers and foxes are only human). Of a female badger, "The noise she is making rivals the sound of the rain driving on to the foliage under which I stand. It's a very fine night badgerwise! Think her son isn't far away, as I can

hear a lot of movement in the copse behind me. Now he's appeared on my left and joined her on the field – two badger minds with but a single thought!" Her familiarity with badger and fox vocalizations allowed her on occasion to imitate them in order to communicate with particular animals.

When the Naturalists' Club is on a night field trip, we use our torchlights most of the time, only turning them off on occasion in order to feel the darkness around us. In contrast, Ferris made only very sparing use of her torch. She used a monocular, but no night-vision or infrared apparatus. Mostly she just relied on her own developed night vision, as would a badger or fox. Unlike other mammals, humans and most primates have colour vision, but this does not function under low light, so that Ferris was seeing the environment as the badgers and foxes did. In time she improved. If I understand correctly, the implication is that her vision became sharper on a purely sensory level, but I doubt that this is correct. What makes the night environment so very strange (even with a torchlight) is that our field of view is fragmented. We only see pieces of what is around us, and the trick is to learn to interpret the fragments. I believe this is what Ferris was able to do, as would a badger or fox.

This, then, is very hard-core nature writing, but who exactly is Chris Ferris? And where was her study area? I don't know. Her identity and study area are disguised, the various place names standing in for the real places (I think I know the county, but I won't tell you.) *Out of the Darkness* includes a double-page facsimile map of the study area. I say "facsimile" because it is imaginary, not representing the real study area. Given this situation, one can reasonably ask whether these books might be works of fiction, or at least highly coloured. However, I have communicated with British ecologists who know Ferris personally and have assured me that her accounts are reliable.

So, why the secrecy? The reason has its origin in a somewhat contradictory attitude of the English toward wild animals. They can be very sentimental toward some animals, while at the same time wantonly cruel toward others. We are all familiar with their mass mounted fox hunts, famously characterized by Oscar Wilde as "the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable." As far as I know, this practice does not endanger the red fox with extinction in Britain, but it remains ridiculous and

cruel. Despite legal restrictions, hunters often dug out setts to capture badgers for blood sports, and at one point Ferris came upon one of her badgers dying after being savaged by a hunter's dog. These hunters did not appreciate her guardianship of the very animals they were intent on capturing or killing, and Ferris was under frequent implied or explicit threat. The latter part of *The Darkness is Light Enough* is largely taken up with observations of and encounters with poachers and other destructive elements, as well as the struggle against their activities. In time Ferris and others were able to organize patrols by volunteers, somewhat in the nature of a neighbourhood watch, sometimes together with the local police or RSPCA.

*Out of the Darkness* is more closely focused on two families of badgers. One family is followed through three and the other through four generations with family trees shown. In this context the book is mainly about the struggle against illegal badger hunting.

In the period following that described in *The Darkness is Light Enough*, this fight increasingly enjoyed official and public support, backed by stricter protective legislation. And those engaged in the fight had access to monitoring equipment. It was no longer a one-woman struggle, a fact subtly indicated in the second book's title. Near the end of the book, Ferris's optimism is made plain: "At last the tide was turning. It has been so many years, so many hunters and so many badgers. But with all of us working together,



the wildlife round Oakley, and most especially the badgers, would at least have a sporting chance.'

#### References

Ferris, C. 1990. *The Badgers of Ashcroft Woods*. London: Harper Collins 256 pp.

Neal, E. 1948. *The Badger*. London: Collins 158 pp.



*Your*  
Ideas and Observations  
A Quarterly Update

## DEFINING OUR GEOGRAPHIC MANDATE

by Christopher K. Starr

Recently, looking through back issues of the journal of the Nigerian Field Society, a counterpart of our club, it struck me that contributions were drawn not just from Nigeria but from many parts of West Africa. Contrast this with our own *Living World* journal. Since it became an annual in 2001, the journal has published 270 research articles and nature notes, aside from biographical pieces. Of these, 235 were based on material from Trinidad & Tobago. That leaves just 35, or 13% of the articles and nature notes on material from elsewhere in the Wider Caribbean, mainly the Lesser Antilles.

It is only right and proper that our research journal should have a bias toward our home

territory, but the present bias strikes me as excessive. This is not a matter of whether it is fair but of missed opportunities. The journal would do well to take a broader, bolder view of its geographic mandate and this should be made explicit.

There is already a counterpart journal, the *Caribbean Naturalist*, whose focus is mainly Puerto Rico, the Bahamas and associated smaller islands. While the pages of the *Living World* must remain open to contributions drawn from throughout the Wider Caribbean, including bordering mainland areas, it would help its identity to have a clearer view of its main focus.